

Zooming in on home truths

Sylvie Levey spent five years filming a family's transition from their rotting downtown Shanghai home to a new apartment in Pudong. Along the way, she found the city's charming old areas can be unlivable for residents, as Xu Wei reports.

French film maker and journalist Sylvie Levey didn't expect that her sojourn in Shanghai would be so long. When she arrived in the city on a chilly Valentine's Day night in 1999, she brought eight cases of books in the hope of writing a book about China.

Similarly, when she started to document the experiences of an ordinary Chinese family awaiting relocation to a new home because their neighborhood was being demolished, she didn't expect it would take five years to finish.

During the period between 2001 and 2006, three generations of the Wang family living under the same roof in a cramped apartment on Fangbang Road M, like many others in such downtown conditions, went through emotional ups and downs during a long relocation process. Now, the family of four have happily settled in a new, bigger apartment in Pudong.

Levey's 92-minute documentary film "Shanghai, Waiting for Paradise," through which she shared the family's hopes for a new start, their fears, laughter and tears, has been released both in France and China, to critical and popular acclaim.

"For the first time, I delved so deeply into human life."

It was recently presented at a special screening at Xintiandi's UME International Cineplex as part of the "DocuChina" project by Shanghai's Documentary Channel where acclaimed documentary works about China are shown on two Fridays of each month.

Levey is now working on a book based on the production experience of this documentary.

"For the first time, I delved so deeply into human life," Levey recalls. "That was my most beautiful journey. I shot the film without using a third party, so my relationship with them was direct. I was like a member of their family, and that's why the film is so strongly subjective: their view became my view."

Like many expats in the city, when she took on this project she felt sad, sometimes anguished, about the rapid disappearance of Shanghai's old charm, especially the old wooden houses the Wangs

lived in.

"At times, I was obsessed with these streets and even dreamed of finding a millionaire to rescue them from demolition," she says. "But a new big home is actually what the Wangs wanted. Just like what the city undergoes, the family also experienced a metamorphosis, from a caterpillar to a beautiful butterfly."

Levey's camera follows the daily routine of the Wang family, from the grandma's afternoon nap, to the father's busy tailoring job to the little girl doing her homework.

At first she hoped to "save" and retain the beauty of old Shanghai through words and images in case it vanished in time.

However, after spending more time with the family, Levey found that her opposition to demolition was not fair to the family. She realized it was difficult for anyone to live in such conditions with the unique Chinese chamber pot, the *matong*, and a tiny bedroom attic to share between three generations.

"In scorching summer days, the family's only hope was to have a bath at a bathroom by themselves," Levey says. "The house was so old that the wood was rotting. Though it had a unique old charm, the Wangs were tired of living there."



Scenes from "Shanghai, Waiting for Paradise"



Left: Wang's family at the dinner table.
Above: A few days before demolition on Fangbang Road M.

The visit of a man from the Demolition and Relocation Committee made the whole family happy."

In order not to miss any key moments in the Wangs' lives, Levey always carried a small camera which the family eventually became used to and forgot about. In the end, 180 hours of film footage was produced which amounted to an intimate, five-year, almost non-stop conservation with some old friends, during which Levey got deeper and deeper into their soul.

"For them this film belongs to the past, and now they have a new beginning."

The Wangs watched the completed film together at their new apartment in Pudong. They applauded and congratulated Levey on her success after a tough job for so many years.

"It has been their life," Levey says. "I felt very touched when they told me that they would move on with a whole new life in this new home. For them this film belongs to the past, and now they have a new beginning."

Many viewers of the film have commented to Levey that they empathize with the characters and the city environment it depicts.

Some see a connection with Chinese director Jia Zhangke's "Still Life" as both films deal with destruction and relocation which transcend cultural differences and feature a universal appeal.

"Actually Jia is my favorite Chinese film maker," Levey says. "I have a big collection of his films and love his work for its humanistic dimension. His characters are human and their stories are powerful. He shows China as it is today."

Born in the fishing port of Saint-Malo on the northern coast of Brittany, Levey's interest in China began at the age of 10, after reading Pearl Buck's novel "East Wind, West Wind."

The book tells how the author, a missionary child who was raised in rural China, developed a deep affection for the Chinese people. At a tender young age, Levey vowed that one day she would find a job to do with this marvelous country.

It's not surprising to see Levey greet her Chinese friends, and even her community's dust man



Levey at her home in Shanghai. — Dong Jun

and security guard, with her crisp and flawless Chinese. She studied Mandarin Chinese in Paris and Taipei and her grasp of the language differentiates her work from that of many other foreign filmmakers.

"I work without an interpreter, which can increase the intimacy and understanding I have with all of my subjects," Levey says proudly. She also takes pride in her Chinese name Le Shiwei, which literally means happy poetry rose, an oriental interpretation of her personality.

Our interview took place at Levey's old Shanghai flavored apartment located on a tranquil boulevard in a city in which she has spent nine years writing and making documentaries. The richly decorated apartment is a treasure trove of many typical pieces of local family life from past decades, such as 1930s-style posters of Shanghai ladies, enamel drink ware, *matongs* and old-fashioned lamps. All of them re-create the atmosphere of the city's lane life.

"Some were found in the city's dismantled old housing areas,"

Levey says. "Look, each of the five beautiful *matongs* used to be a present for young couples when they got married. Now I put beer bottles and cups in them."

On her printer, Levey has written the Chinese idiom "*mou shi zai ren, cheng shi zai tian*," meaning "man proposes and God disposes" which has become her motto.

"I love meeting people. Human stories always have the magic to touch me deep in my heart."

An officially accredited filmmaker with Artline Films, Levey has been dubbed the "third eye watching China" by her Chinese friends. As an eyewitness to the nation's development, she has had discussions with many Chinese people, including farmers, herdsman, migrant workers and school children.

"I love meeting people," Levey says with her brilliant smile.



Levey among a group of children in Shandong Province.



Levey happily carries a baby in an embroidered backpack while making a film in Guizhou Province.

"Human stories always have the magic to touch me deep in my heart." In addition to "Shanghai, Waiting for Paradise," the filmmaker has done a few other films in China, one vividly documenting the life and career of transsexual dancer-choreographer Jin Xing and another tracing the effects of China's family planning policy.

After busy working days, Levey likes to spend her weekend with a morning walk in the Zhongshan Park, afternoon tea at the over-decorated Yongfoo Elite (former British Consulate), dinner at M on the Bund, where she can get a bird's eye view of the Huangpu River, and a night car trip around Pudong with her camera.

Her affection for Shanghai comes from its ability to offer "so many surprises" and gives her a special "at home feeling."

"Shanghai is like a sophisticated, feminine, romantic woman," Levey says. "Amazing changes are happening every day here. It is a magnificent experience for me to watch the beautiful butterfly progress from a caterpillar."

Even today, Levey considers her beautiful encounter with the city to be destiny. Shanghai would not be on her life schedule if she hadn't been captivated by the beauty of

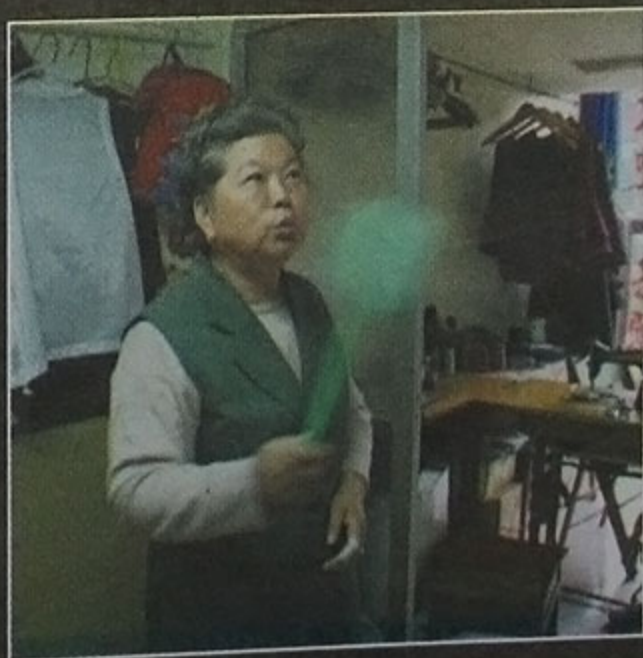
the city's old wooden houses from photos she took during a business trip. These pictures re-ignited the enthusiasm of her childhood.

Now, the five years she spent with the Wang family turn out to be the most exciting part of her time in the city. It included everything she aspired to write and record and she learned more about China during the exercise than anything she read or was taught at university.

"I am compiling my shooting and production experience of the documentary into a book," she adds. "It is like a return to the past, a process that always moves me to tears."

Levey notes that many foreigners have a superficial understanding of China. In her case, she feels it is only after five years of staying with ordinary residents that she can get a clearer picture about the modern Chinese psyche and how it has been affected by what is, at times, overwhelming change.

"We Westerners usually look at other countries with our big thick glasses," Levey adds. "We're so used to relying on our own point of view to judge. However, the key to understanding China is modesty; by being modest you can get as close as possible to the essence of China and its people."



Far left: Wang's daughter eats breakfast while her mother braids her hair. Left: Grandmother Yu Meilan swats the flies. Above: A family friend visits the house.